How to incorporate guided practice into your writing lessons - with Leah Mermelstein

Triple R Teaching Podcast #205

Hello, this is Anna Geiger, author of *Reach All Readers* and creator of the Reach All Readers website. We're continuing our series about teaching writing.

Today I'm talking with Leah Mermelstein. She's an author of multiple books, including *We Do Writing: Maximizing Practice to Develop Independent Writers*. The focus of our conversation today is going to be how to incorporate more guided practice into your writing lessons. Here we go!

Anna Geiger:

Welcome, Leah!

Leah Mermelstein:

Hi! Thanks so much for having me, Anna.

Anna Geiger:

I'm really excited to talk to you about teaching writing, but before we do that, could you introduce us to yourself and talk about your history in education and as a writing teacher?

Leah Mermelstein:

Absolutely. So I'm old; I've been in the education field for 30 years. I began as a classroom teacher in New York City, and I evolved into my current role now as a literacy consultant, a literacy coach, and an author.

My work is grounded in a commitment to both the art and the science of teaching literacy.

I'm completely and utterly fascinated by the art of it. I'm in schools all the time, so I'm always studying the practices that engage students and resonate with their unique needs.

But I'm equally driven and nerdy about the science, kind of leveraging the research to guide ongoing literacy, instruction, and curriculum.

In addition to working with schools now, a newer leg of my work involves partnering with families, as well as tutoring students in both reading and writing who are stuck in some way. I can't even tell you how much those two worlds are really helping each other.

I would love to start our conversation today by sharing, because I've been in the field for a while, three key evolutions that have occurred to me over the past decade or so in the area of writing. These shifts, I think, will keep popping up as we talk more. I know we're going to talk about my book today, and they're going to keep popping up.

My evolution wasn't a sudden realization like I've been doing *everything* wrong. I feel like it was a slow, less dramatic evolution that really came from always being curious from the start. It came from being

curious about the research, being curious about the impact in my day-to-day work with students and educators, and being curious about what to do next when I didn't see the impact I wanted.

I've got three of them. Should I share them now?

Anna Geiger:

Absolutely.

Leah Mermelstein:

Okay, so evolution number one was the idea of integrating phonics more deliberately into the broader literacy day.

Phonics instruction, I would say, when I first was a teacher and when I was first working in schools, was at times less systematic and more siloed.

Now one of my top priorities in schools is to show schools how to fully integrate what's being taught in phonics into ongoing writing instruction. I think when we talk later about interactive writing, you're going to really see that shift.

Number two is really prioritizing deliberate practice.

I would say even in my early years, I prioritized practice, but I feel like in the past decade, I've become much more intentional about helping schools design specific practice opportunities in the area of writing for students.

Also we want to be super, super crystal clear about the purpose of each type of practice. Whether I'm having students practicing phonics, or spelling encoding practice, or sentence syntax by having students orally compose and/or write more complicated sentences, or guiding students as they try and put all the parts of writing together.

I partner with schools to support them in creating the right types of writing practice, as well as the right type of support.

That was really the purpose of the three types of writing sessions that I feature in my book.

Then evolution number three is writing about helping schools kind of put a bigger emphasis on having students write about what they're reading and learning.

I would also say I'm more intentional now about that. I really help educators create integrated curriculum instruction. There are loads of opportunities for students to write about what they're reading, and lots of opportunities for students to write about what they're learning in science and social studies.

With that being said, I'm also confident from my work in schools that self-chosen topics should still have a place in the writing curriculum and instruction. Perhaps not as big of a place as they had in the 90s when I first started teaching, but I'm confident that they have a place.

I would say, yes, those are my three big evolutions.

I'm super curious to hear from you, Anna, because I know that we have similar, not exact, but similar paths. I'd be curious to hear from you if you've had similar evolutions or different ones.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, great question. As we go through this writing series, I'm learning a lot from people like you and rethinking how I would approach teaching writing.

All my years of teaching were with a writing workshop model. I don't think everything about the writing workshop model is wrong, in fact, by the time this episode comes out, I'll have already published one with Steve Graham and he's not opposed to the model itself.

The problem is in some instances, and certainly in mine, there was a lack of explicit instruction. I also think it was too much following the students' lead every day, versus saying this is the specific structure we're going to use to write a paragraph, and now we're going to practice. I definitely did not do a lot of deliberate practice and definitely, definitely not enough.

I think because I myself like to write, and I feel like that is a strength of mine, I felt that I could look at a student's writing and kind of pick something out to help to address. But it became difficult to show other teachers how to do what I was doing because it kind of assumed that you had this natural knowledge of figuring out what was wrong. I'm not saying I was always very good at it. For someone who didn't feel like a confident writer, I was kind of leaving them in the dark.

I think there was also a lot of, like you said, focus on student choice, which I think is good. I don't think we should get rid of that either entirely, but I did not integrate reading and writing very much. I thought if we need to have this block of writing, which I think you can have, but don't have to… I thought that was the only way and that putting writing in other subjects wasn't really very beneficial.

Now I understand how research is very, very strong on telling us that those two things go together, and that writing about reading makes a huge difference.

Those are kind of my big ones.

Leah Mermelstein:

Yeah. Steve Graham has a quote in one of his articles where he says that there is nothing that makes knowledge stick more than writing about what you're reading. I can really see it crystal clear when I'm working with students one-on-one. You watch them when they're writing about what they're reading going back to the text. It's really thinking about ways to kind of craft a curriculum so that there are both.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, so we're going to get into your book, and as long as we're talking about Steve Graham, I'll read his endorsement for your book which is on the back. He said, "I love this book, and so will any teacher who teaches writing or wants to become a better writing teacher. Interactive writing, writing out loud, and the writing process come alive. Your students will become more motivated and better writers." You can't ask for a better endorsement from a bigger expert.

Why did you write your book called *We Do Writing*?

Leah Mermelstein:

I'd say there are probably two key reasons that I talk about in the book why I really felt compelled to write this book.

The first reason was rooted in both what I saw happening anecdotally in classrooms, as well as the research I was diving into. As I observed the lessons in schools, I noticed a pattern. Teachers were delivering what looked to be, if you just looked at it, strong instruction. The parts of the lesson I observed were explicit. They were clear, and the lessons often included a We Do component. It was quick, but it was there.

But after that quick We Do part was when the problem occurred. At times, almost immediately, all students were expected to independently try what they had just kind of learned about by writing on a new, unique topic. There's nothing gradual about that release. I kept saying it's a nosedive into independence, and it didn't work for many, many students.

The students who needed that additional practice, they could absolutely have done it. They were just under-practiced, and they were being left behind.

I knew it didn't need to be that way, so it was those observations that led me to dig deeper into the gradual part of the gradual release of responsibility.

The second reason was the confusion I kept hearing from teachers.

This was at the very beginning when science of reading was just starting to kind of find its way into classrooms. For years, they've been encouraged to have students to write in their minds. They've been encouraged to have students write often, and write long, to choose their own topics, and to focus on finding joy in writing.

All of sudden these teachers felt that the messaging was shifting really, really fast. They were being asked to emphasize writing about academic content, what students were learning and reading, or science or social studies, and to focus more on sentence-level work rather than generating a large volume of writing. Those shifts felt really overwhelming to some and confusing to some of them too.

But on the other hand, there are other teachers who were also hesitant and wary because the messaging they were hearing is that they were doing it all wrong.

The truth of the matter is that topics like writing about reading, focusing on sentence level instruction, systematic and explicit phonics, *was* already in their mind and part of their instruction in what they named balanced literacy classrooms. Joy writing, and only caring about volume, and solely choice topics didn't define what was happening in their schools and their classrooms.

Absolutely there might be some rebalancing or some reflections that needed to occur, but perhaps not a complete overhaul.

And so I wanted to write a book that helped to unpack that nuance of those literacy shifts. Then I wanted my book to be part of the solution, and to really help avoid just another pendulum swing. That's one thing I say every time I go to a school, I'm trying to stop that pendulum swing.

We Do Writing was my response to both of those challenges. *We Do Writing* is not a curriculum, but it's a framework that can be used alongside any curriculum. I work with a lot of different schools who have a lot of different resources and curricula, and we kind of use that as the framework to help really avoid that pendulum shift.

Anna Geiger:

I like what you said about how often you were seeing a nosedive into independent work without gradually releasing. GRR is what you call it in the book, gradual release of responsibility. Why is that so important?

Leah Mermelstein:

Yeah, I'm glad we're starting with the gradual release because every session I talk about in the book has the gradual release of responsibility baked into it.

The gradual release of responsibility was introduced by Pearson and Gallagher in 1983. It's a framework for gradually releasing responsibility from teacher to student. It's grounded in many research studies, which we can certainly put into the show notes.

Fisher and Frey later expanded the GRR into a more formalized model across subjects and emphasizing its stages. I Do, which is modeling. We Do, which is guided practice. You Do together, which could be that collaborative practice. Finally, independent application.

But here's the reflective part; this is why I think it's important. Many educators, including myself… I always believed I was doing gradual release, but was I?

For example, in my classroom in the early days, I would absolutely model writing. I would have said, "I'm doing this! I'm doing it." I would very briefly give students guided practice, so there's the We Do, and then I send students off to do it on their own. But that wasn't gradual; it was like a nosedive.

What's interesting is I see that on *all* ends of the conversation. People are saying they're doing the gradual release, but it's in one lesson.

Also I had at that time an ongoing writing workshop where I thought I was doing that gradual release, but I didn't have any other types of writing instruction or practice opportunities in place to stop that nosedive.

I was lucky enough, when I wrote the book, I actually spoke with Dr. Pearson. and there were four key takeaways that I got from that conversation that kind of helped me to further understand and think about why it's important.

One thing was that he really appreciated that you'll see in the book, is how I talk about adding an immersion phase to the gradual release.

Sometimes that word has a strange connotation, so I kind of want to define what I mean by that. When I think about an immersion phase in a writing unit, it's about writing a text together that's like the one students would eventually write, with a deliberate focus on sentence construction and practice. It also includes a deep, deep dive into studying a text like the ones that students would write.

I think immersion sometimes gets this idea of we're just going to love on books, but this is very much a structured and purposeful immersion.

Typically, what I would suggest in immersion, when I'm working with teachers, is that students don't write immediately afterwards. It might be a week or a month or even, in kindergarten, it could be a few months of collaborative practice before this moves into independent writing.

This immersion, and sometimes I've heard people call it worked examples… To me, when I read that definition, it feels similar. It strengthens understanding and engagement, and it gets students orally practicing and analyzing the sentences of a particular genre well before they're asked to write it.

What's interesting about immersion is that's something I've been doing since the 90s. That's not new. I think it's become more structured over time, but the idea of starting a writing study with immersion. That was something that Dr. Pearson and I talked about.

The second thing he talked about, which I think is important to think about in terms of classroom application, is that the GRR is recursive; it's not linear. It isn't a one-way path. You might be in the We Do writing, but then you watch your kids and you realize you need to return to complete modeling. Or you might, for some kids, skip the We Do because you can see they're ready to move on to their own and do it themselves.

The other thing he said, which I think is super interesting, is sometimes starting with the children doing it first quickly gives you insight into what students need for modeling or for guided practice. He was saying he wished he had explored that more.

Then the fourth thing we talked about is just the idea of lingering longer in that We Do, in that collaborative part, which is really the theme of my book.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, it's interesting to think about why some teachers, I include myself, may have been hesitant or not done that so much. I've done the nosedive.

I think about it as being a parent, like teaching my kids, for example, to wash the bathroom sinks and counters. I might just say, "Here's the paper towel, here's a spray, clean it up." Then I'm frustrated later that they've left toothpaste here, or they haven't gone at the bottom of the drain. But I never told them and I never watched them do it. I never practiced. Being a parent helps you see how you can't just have these expectations.

But I think as a teacher, I did. I thought if I just tell them they should be able to do it, and I'm wasting our time if I'm holding their hand for too long.

Do you think there are any other reasons why teachers maybe have not spent enough time doing it with the students?

Leah Mermelstein:

Well, I can speak to the schools I've partnered with. I think if you are imagining your writing instruction as writing workshop, then that wasn't baked into the process. The structure was to do a mini lesson, have kids go work, and then come back and share.

One of the things that's been a kind of an evolution is that when I'm talking about writing instruction, some schools that I work with still have that writing workshop model, and it works as long as there are other components surrounding it, as long as you're really thinking about how all these parts fit together.

I think when you think about writing instruction in a bigger way than just a quick lesson and independent writing, it makes it easier to imagine how to make it work.

This weekend as I was getting ready for this podcast, I was thinking about a similar parenting thing… It was frustrating because you teach this lesson, and then you're in writing workshop, and you're like, "Why aren't students getting it?"

I was liking it to the example of where I might be talking to my daughter about how we're having dinner guests over, and it's important that you make conversation. Then being frustrated if they didn't or being super happy that they did.

The real trick, and this is why I still think self-chosen topics are important… The real trick is not that she can make good conversation at the dinner table with adults right after I told her. The real trick is that she can make good adult conversation when I'm not there.

When I have another adult tell me, "Gosh, your daughter was so inquisitive at our dinner table." That's when I know I've made the transfer.

That's what I think. That's why I think self-chosen topics are still important. It's not because it should come first, but that's the real trick.

There's some research on close transfer and far transfer, and the idea that different kinds of transfer require different levels of effort. It's just interesting to think about trying to create a curriculum where all of these are in place.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, that's very interesting to think about that as being the goal versus the initial practice.

I think that's a really good point you made about how the traditional schedule of the writing workshop does not allow for that period of guided writing because then you're out of time. But to realize that your lesson could be a mini lesson, or whatever kind of lesson, and guided practice, the end. Maybe that's what your lesson is for that day, and that's perfectly fine. Would you agree with that?

Leah Mermelstein:

Yes. It's really crafting your lesson based upon your students and what you see that they needed.

I was just partnering with a school last week where they're still doing… I mean, some people would look at this and say, "This doesn't feel like writing workshop," but they're still calling it writing workshop.

It was a unit on writing about what you're reading, and the unit had gradual release baked into it. The unit began with them reading a text together and writing about that text, sentence by sentence, together. The next chunk of the unit, they were reading a text, and they were still writing about it together, but they were sending them off to write parts of it in partnerships. Kids who needed to stay with them, stayed with them. But the goal of the end of the study was that kids would write one on their own.

Even when I'm planning units now with teachers, that kind of gradual release is baked into it.

Anna Geiger:

In your book, you talk about three We Do instructional session types: interactive writing, write alouds, and the writing process. We're going to walk through those.

Talk to us about interactive writing. First of all, what that is, and then I'd like to have you talk about what that would look like a few months into kindergarten.

Leah Mermelstein:

Great, okay. The first session is interactive writing, like you said. It's a type of session that would fit underneath the language conventions bucket. I've crafted this structure using the collaborative structure that I learned in my earliest days of teaching, sharing that pen with students. But I'm pairing that collaborative structure with the scope and sequence of whatever phonics program a school is using.

That version of interactive writing I'm sharing includes a more deliberate focus on Linnea Ehri's work on orthographic mapping, which is giving students scaffolded practice with phonemic awareness, phonics, spelling, and decoding. It also leans on a key principle from the research on deliberate blocked, spaced out, and interleaved practice.

I'll just give you an example of interactive writing from last week when I was in a kindergarten classroom, working with a team of kindergarten teachers. I collaborated with the class and together, the kids and I wrote the following sentence on chart paper, "I fed a pig." All the sounds in those words had already

been taught during phonics instruction in the past few weeks, so in this situation, we were leveraging interactive writing to give students spaced out practice.

Some students participated by coming up to the chart to write the letter or to be the space maker. As those kids were coming up, all of the students were saying the sounds as that student wrote. So if they were writing the /f/ in "fed," as that student wrote the F, all the kids were saying /f/ to kind of help with that practice.

Others practiced individual words on dry erase boards in the midst of that lesson. After we wrote "fed," I might say, "Okay, everyone get your dry erase boards out. Let's all practice writing 'fed,' saying the sounds as you write it."

Some listeners might be listening right now and saying, "Wait, what you're describing kind of sounds like dictation." It's certainly a close relative, but the difference in my experiences is that it's more scaffolded and focused more on practice, and less on solely as a means of assessment. I can't speak for all teachers, but that's what I've seen.

It was really interesting after the work in classrooms last week, teachers through their thoughtful dialogue decided to have an alternating schedule. On A weeks, they would focus more on dictation, where they gave students a sentence to write with not as much support, assessing their spelling. Then the B week featured the more scaffolded interactive writing session, based on what they observed and saw in those dictation samples. Really they were taking that action on data.

What's powerful about this approach also is that we can differentiate it for different needs during the whole class. This also might kind of speak to what I might do in the beginning of kindergarten. I might use sound lines for early learners. I might say, "In 'fed,' there are three sounds. I put my sound lines, /f/-/ĕ/-/d/."

I might gesture to help them think about each sound. If they were leaving out the /ĕ/, I might say, "What sound do you hear when my finger's under this line?" And I point to that little line.

For kids who I wanted to nudge forward, I might even focus on words with more than one syllable. So if most of the kids are writing "pig," I could kind of nudge some other kids to write piglet.

In terms of kindergarten, in the early days, it may just be much more collaborative or it might just be a single word. Maybe the kids are skywriting, or maybe I'm doing more of it.

But I recommend to teachers that they start this right from the get-go, because it's application of what they're learning during phonics.

Anna Geiger:

So this would be the teacher preparing a sentence in advance, then saying, "We're going to write this sentence."

Do you keep doing interactive writing when kids are past the early phonetic stages, like second or third grade? If so, what does that look like?

Leah Mermelstein:

In this particular school we did it in K, 1, and 2, and I'm going to keep doing it until I'm seeing when kids are writing independently that far transfer. I'm going to keep doing it until kids are easily and automatically doing this in their spelling.

For example, in both classrooms I was in, they were not seeing, on a regular basis, that most kids were applying what they had learned during phonics accurately and automatically.

The whole idea of spaced out practice, I think, is one I've been thinking about even more with this. Very often what happens in phonics instruction sometimes is you're working on the /oy/ sound in February, and you have all kinds of block practice and kids are doing pretty well with it. Then you move onto something else, and then kids are not transferring that.

I'm recommending to teachers that for interactive writing, they're a unit behind.

This the other thing I see in first, second, and in third grade as well, we start to put some words with more than one syllable in there. We give kids real practice in doing in doing that. I do see this as being beneficial, with the goal being transfer. What we want for the phonics is for kids to be encoding those words on a regular basis, easily and automatically, so that's not on their mind anymore.

Anna Geiger:

It's a supported activity in which the teacher has prepared a sentence in advance. It's going to review phonics patterns, so we're not just focusing on the pattern of the day or the week. It also would be a place to work on capitalization and punctuation.

I could see it, even if you would do something like this in third grade, maybe you're noticing that students aren't using quotation marks properly. Your sentence could include that. You basically choose things that you know they need help with.

Would this be something that each teacher would need to figure out on their own, versus having some kind of list of sentences. They really need to be paying attention to what's going on?

Leah Mermelstein:

That's a great question.

I'm working with a school now where their curriculum had dictation sentences, so they didn't have to create them. All they had to do was to go back and use some of those differently.

I think, for the most part, most of the schools I've worked in have some, because they have dictation. This is a really easy shift.

The teachers I was working with last week had this "aha" moment of, "Why are we doing all this dictation and then not taking action on what we're seeing? We're kind of going through the motion. The phonics curriculum says do this dictation now and assess it. But how are we taking action on that? The interactive writing was the answer to that.

Then if you don't have that, we had some fun trying this out. This is when I think Chat GPT is one of your best friends.

Actually, two or three days ago, I was in another district and they're working on seasons during their content area instruction. They're trying to get kids to write CVC words, and they just said, "Can you give me a short sentence for kindergarten kids about seasons with CVC words?" And there it was.

What's really wonderful about both people having good resources and us having AI, is that the coming up with these is not hard at all.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, although sometimes Chat-GPT has an odd idea of what CVC words are; you have to be careful.

Leah Mermelstein:

I have seen that before, that's true.

Anna Geiger:

But yes, I love using AI for helping me with these things. Sometimes you have to give them a little bit of a push to get it right.

So we talked about interactive writing. Are there any last things you want to share about that, or any pitfalls to avoid or anything before we move on to the next one?

Leah Mermelstein:

I think the pitfall to avoid is really keeping the science of learning in mind and not just doing block practice. It's not just doing interactive writing sentences on what you're currently studying, but continually going back.

Anna Geiger:

Perfect.

Now if you could talk to us about a write aloud. That's something I had not heard of before, that phrasing. What is it? What's the purpose of it? Then we'll talk about how it might look different in different grades.

Leah Mermelstein:

Awesome. Okay, so a write aloud would go under the language composition bucket. It's grounded in fascinating research on the production effect, which emphasizes, and this is no surprise to teachers, it emphasizes the stickiness of oral language practice, when students say that loud. It's also focused on Steve Graham's research on sentence expansion and sentence combining.

This practice in write aloud is all about collaboratively constructing a sentence, and then practicing that complex sentence orally, not one child, but all the children.

For example, in kindergarten, we might start by composing and practicing with a simple sentence that includes a noun and a verb about a class field trip. Maybe it would be, "Our class ate with chopsticks." We would construct that together and then they would practice it.

The next day we might expand that sentence by constructing and then adding a "when" phrase like "one rainy morning" and a "where" phrase at the end, like "in the Chinese restaurant."

Then over the next few days, we would add a few more sentences to write that complete story.

If you imagine that structure, there are three or four power sentences in that narrative.

We could do very similar things across the year with the nonfiction genre or the opinion genre, orally composing three or four complex sentences, or power sentences, that they could one day write.

Early in the year in kindergarten, this might be purely oral practice. But by the end of kindergarten, students could use that process to write leads for their story, embedding that spaced out and interleaved practice.

If you think about the language comprehension portion of reading, where you're reading far richer texts than kids could read on their own, I see that the same thing when writing. You might be writing far richer texts that kids could write on their own, but they're getting that rich sentence level work early, early on.

In second grade, I recently worked with students who had just read the book, *Knuffle Bunny Free*, and were responding to it.

Anna Geiger:

I haven't heard of that one. I didn't know. I only read the first one, my goodness!

Leah Mermelstein:

You have to read it; it's a tearjerker.

Anna Geiger:

Oh no, does she grow out of the bunny? Is that what happens?

Leah Mermelstein:

Yes, but she does something very compassionate. It's both happy and sad.

We had finished reading that book in second grade, and the kids were responding to the prompt, "Explain how Trixie changed throughout the story."

The teacher had introduced the word "transformed" during that word study, and collaboratively, we constructed the sentence starting with a "where" phrase.

"In the book, *Knuffle Bunny*, Trixie transformed into a new person." That was the opening topic sentence.

Each day we worked on constructing another sentence, eventually creating a paragraph.

If you go back to a kind of writing unit, this was part of the initial phase of a writing unit. It was during the immersion phase of teaching students to write about change in character.

Some of the classrooms I worked in had students write independently about this book using that worked example as a guide, while others extended the strategy to a new book, helping students gradually move toward independent sentence construction while writing a paragraph about character change.

Anna Geiger:

So is the point of write aloud to get them to say it with their mouths, or what would you say?

Leah Mermelstein:

Absolutely. I think it's having them say it with their mouths before... It wouldn't be that you say it with your mouth and now you go write it.

In kindergarten, it might be you say it with your mouth, you say it with your mouth, you say it with your mouth, you say it with your mouth, and then you go write it three months from now.

In second grade, it could be you say it with your mouth during the first week, and now you write it the second week.

Anna Geiger:

As you're slowly building that paragraph over the week, is this written out at all, or is it all oral completely?

Leah Mermelstein:

Great question. I don't think there's one way to do this, but what I tend to do is… What I want the teacher doing is spending his or her time helping kids orally construct that sentence.

I might do something like, "Turn to the person next to you and practice that sentence out loud." I don't want to be spending my time in that moment writing. I want to be spending my time going up next to kids and giving them that prompt, timely feedback. "Say it again. Can you put that new vocabulary word in?"

I was just doing this last week and one of the kids went back to change because that was an easier word than transform. I said, "Give it another try; try that vocabulary word." That's where I am now.

When the kids leave me, I go write that, and I might even color code it. I might put the "where" phrase in the beginning in purple and the verb in green.

And so when we come to work on it the next day, I'll say, "I wrote our sentence up here. Let's read it."

It is getting written, but I always recommend that teachers are not writing it while kids are practicing. That's your time to give them that feedback on their sentence syntax.

Anna Geiger:

I really love that because I think so much of when students are writing, at least in my experience, they're just kind of trying to get it out of their head as they go. They haven't really thought it through in advance.

Do you find that this transfers into having kids actually think and plan their sentence before they put it on paper?

Leah Mermelstein:

I think it does as long as the teacher's being deliberate about making that. There comes that kind of slowly moving kids towards transfer.

Let's imagine a week from now, and they're going to start writing their own. I might say things like, "We began ours with a 'where' phrase. Where did we find this? Then we had a noun and a verb. Think in your head. Now turn to the person next to you and practice that sentence out loud."

Kids will sometimes say things like, "I'm going to write about when Trixie changed."

And I have to say, "Mm-mm-mm! You're not saying what you're *going* to do; you're literally going to practice it out loud."

I think that oral rehearsal and baking that into how you teach writing is huge.

The other thing is I think it's really important to have some accountability to kids trying out new vocabulary. I don't want all their paragraphs to look identical. I don't want to say that you must use these six words, but there might be ten words we've been talking about, and I'm going to ask them to at least try four of these words.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, that's a really good idea too. You could put this into your vocabulary lessons. You're teaching a new word, and we're going to make a sentence, and you practice that first.

Any pitfalls to avoid with write aloud?

Leah Mermelstein:

I think one pitfall is to avoid writing it in front of them and not giving kids feedback. Make sure that everybody's saying the sentence out loud, not just your kids who can do it.

Another pitfall is I'd be really deliberate about constructing that sentence together. If you're not careful about that, you'll have a kid who can do it easily raise their hand and say, "In the book, *Knuffle Bunny*, Trixie transformed."

Instead, I'd say, "Who can come up with the 'where' phrase? What's the noun in this? What's the verb? Let's put it together."

That class construction, I think, is really important to keep everybody engaged and everybody practicing.

Anna Geiger:

So I know research supports using the writing process, teaching kids to plan, write, revise, and edit. How can we do guided practice with the writing process?

Leah Mermelstein:

Great. The final session of my book I call writing process, and it fits under what I would call the application bucket. It's focusing on supporting students as they orchestrate the multiple parts of writing together. It's planning, drafting, revising, and editing, all while applying what they've been learning about language conventions.

I was lucky enough to do a podcast with Kelly Cartwright, and she likened this to how we can pat our head pretty easily and we can rub our belly, but if you ask me to do those things together, it's harder.

I think that's what happened in writing workshop. We were like, "Okay, you've learned about phonics. You've learned about sentence construction. Go try patting your head and rubbing your belly at the same time without doing it together."

Writing process is a session that is about doing it together.

For example, in one classroom example featured in my book, after a read aloud, the class works together to write about the book. Out loud, they plan a few sentences using what they've learned about sentence and text. They practice it orally. Then the teacher is writing it quickly, but she's slowing down when they get to words with more than one syllable because they've been working on that during their phonics time. Then they go back and they revise and edit collaboratively.

This is happening in really all three of these sessions.

I think the trick also, and maybe it's a pitfall to avoid, is not to have them go on for too long. These are like ten or fifteen minutes of really deliberate practice that's happening often.

The teacher in that situation is providing support throughout the process so students can be successful with orchestrating many parts of writing at the same time.

Anna Geiger:

We talked about how there could be different approaches to teaching writing. You could have this block of writing time, you could fit it intentionally after other subjects, or you could do both. Certainly I can see how these things make sense.

Let's say you're teaching about birds in science, you could do a read-a-lot about birds together, construct a sentence, and have them practice saying it. You could work together to write a paragraph about birds, working them through the writing process.

If a teacher, let's say in kindergarten, wants to have a block of writing time, maybe 20 or 30 minutes, how might that look if they're trying to keep in mind the gradual release of responsibility?

Leah Mermelstein:

So I think fitting it all into a daily schedule can feel overwhelming. First of all, there's a chart in my book that I think can help with that. Here are just a few tips.

One is keeping each session short but consistent. You can be thinking of it as spaced out practice, a little bit each day, rather than large amounts of block practice.

Then the second thing is really sitting down... It's so hard to say this is exactly how I would do it because every school I work in is so different. But I think naming out that problem, how do we use our 30 minutes of writing instruction... I think you can sit down with your grade level, your team, a coach, or a consultant like me to work through the time constraints and your data.

I think about when I'm really busy, I make a list of what I need to do and the time I have, and it helps me focus and get it done. Teachers really can do the same. They look at their data in September, and they adjust sessions based on what's needed throughout the year.

For example, in a kindergarten classroom, you might not be looking in September to say that writing process, orchestrating all the parts together, is a really great idea for September in kindergarten. That might work better later in the year as students develop, while ten minutes of read aloud and ten minutes of interactive writing are powerful starting points.

I think it's really looking at how much time do I have and what is my data showing me.

Anna Geiger:

Can you give an example of data, and what that might be telling teachers?

Leah Mermelstein:

Yeah. For example, some data might be really informal, like you're listening to students talk, and you're seeing that they're having a hard time putting more than a noun and verb together. Then you might say to yourself, "I want to do a write aloud where we just have an article, a noun, and a verb. I'm going to do write aloud with that. I really want to work on sentence expansion."

It might be that I've started my phonics instruction, and I'm using kindergarten as an example because I think it's often hardest in the beginning of the year in kindergarten. While I'm looking at my phonics instruction, I've worked on some sounds, but I'm seeing very little transfer, and I can see they're having a really hard time on segmenting the sounds in a word. Then my interactive writing might be a single

word or maybe two words, and we're focusing on slowing down that segmenting part and listening to that.

The sessions are the buckets, but the data that I'm seeing is really how I make it tailored to the kids in front of me.

Anna Geiger:

Thank you, that really helps.

Any other tips for scaffolding or supporting students in their writing? At the very beginning, I think we talked about how, after you do some guided writing or one of these activities, potentially if there is independent time, you might have some students with you at the table while other students do it independently. Do you have tips for supporting students who are struggling or just need extra support?

Leah Mermelstein:

A few different things. For the foundational skills, I think of things like sound lines and gesturing and at times pulling those kids together, because part of it is they just need more teacher support. I like to think about small group work as I've got my Tier 1 instruction, and then I'm trying to help some kids keep up, so I might pull that small group of kids and do the exact same thing, just in a small group. And I don't even mean the *exact* same thing, I might slow down the phonemic awareness part, but I'm not changing the sentence, or I'm not changing what we're doing. I'm just giving them more support with the idea of trying to help them keep up with that instruction.

For write aloud, sometimes giving kids some key questions like “where,” “why,” or “how” helps kids to do that sentence expansion on their own.

Also in my toolkit, I feature lots of different, whether you call it independent center work or seat work, that gives kids more practice with this. I think sometimes, historically, centers are getting a bad name because kids are just going off and practicing random things, but I think there's a way to do it in a way that gives kids… If we think kids are under-practiced, what we're trying to do is give them more practice. I think there are ways to align some of that independent center work with what you're doing in Tier 1 instruction.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, that makes a lot of sense.

Well, thank you. Is there anything else you'd like to share or any future projects you're working on?

Leah Mermelstein:

I just want to add that I really hope that we can keep… The word that always pops up in my head, because I go from school to school, is nuance and dialogue.

Every school I work in is different. What's the same is that I'm always trying to make sure they have impact that's lasting, and that research could should guide us, but it shouldn't confine us. We use the research, but also are looking at what's happening in front of us. Teachers are not researchers. They can balance the science with what they see in their classrooms, staying curious and reflective along the way.

I really, really believe it's about teamwork. Every single person brings a different level of expertise. Teachers bring it because they're in there every single day. Researchers, they're not in the classrooms every single day, but they're doing the research to help guide what tends to work. Students, families, and caregivers are coming together. Teamwork is the dream work.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, I love that. That's really good advice too, because we do know that research is important, but we also know... Steve Graham will say that just because it worked in this setting doesn't mean it's going to work in yours. You have to be paying attention.

Thank you so much for your book. I would encourage people to check it out, and I'll link to anything else that you want to share.

Thank you so much, Leah. You can find the show notes for today's episode at reachallreaders.com/episode205. Talk to you next time!

Leah Mermelstein:

Thank you so much, Anna, for having me!

Closing:

That's all for this episode of Triple R Teaching. For more educational resources, visit Anna at her home base, reachallreaders.com, and join our teaching community. We look forward to helping you reflect, refine, and recharge on the next episode of Triple R Teaching.